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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001680

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SUBJECT: YOUTH REPORTEDLY DISCOURAGED FROM MOSQUE ATTENDANCE

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Classified By: Classified By: POLOFF RICHARD FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.
4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a September 5 meeting at Namangan's Mahdum Ishon Mosque, Namangan province Head Imam Tursunov allegedly ordered imams to bar schoolchildren from attending nightly readings of the Qur'an during Ramadan. Word of the reported incident has spread in the community, causing resentment among Muslims. A contact in Namangan later told poloff that Uzbek-state radio confirmed that Tursunov had given such orders, but that he was acting on his own accord without instructions from the Muslim Spiritual Board in Tashkent. Separately, a member of the Human Rights Alliance told poloff that authorities have demolished unregistered mosques in Andijon over the last three months. Reports that the Government is discouraging youth from attending mosques is not new, but the alleged incident with Tursunov may represent a new intensification of its efforts. End summary.

TURSUNOV: IMAMS TO "BURN IN HELL" IF YOUTH ATTEND PRAYERS

¶2. (U) On September 7, the independent Ferghana.ru website reported that Namangan Region Head Iman Abdulkhai Tursunov presented to the province's imam-khatibs (heads of mosques) new regulations from Tashkent's Muslim Spiritual Board concerning religious services during the holy month of Ramadan. At the September 5 meeting at Namangan's Mahdum Ishon Mosque, Tursunov allegedly told the imams that youth should be barred from the nightly readings of the Qur'an during Ramadan. Tursunov is quoted as saying that if the imams invite schoolchildren into their mosques, their mosques will be closed and they will "burn in hell" as a result. The article notes that Namangan authorities already carefully monitor youth attendance at mosques and officials from the Ministry of Education frequently raid mosques on Fridays looking for truants.

¶3. (U) According to the Ferghana.ru article, Tursunov ordered that imams complete their nightly readings of the Qur'an during Ramadan by 22:00 and report any suspicious activity to the proper authorities. Tursunov also reportedly instructed imams to make a 20,000 soum (16 dollar) donation to Namangan's Mulla Kyrgyz Madraseh and only allow its graduates to read the Qur'an each night (Note: Tursunov also serves as director of the Madraseh. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) During a trip to the Ferghana Valley, poloff arranged a meeting with Tursunov on September 12. However, when poloff arrived at the Mulla Kyrgyz Madraseh in Namangan, he was informed by its deputy director that Tursunov could

not meet him as he had been called away on "urgent" business to Tashkent that morning. When poloff requested to speak at greater length with the deputy director and asked for a tour of the Madraseh, he was told he must first request permission from the Namangan hokimyat (city hall).

WORD OF TURSUNOV'S INSTRUCTIONS LEAKS TO COMMUNITY

¶ 15. (C) Several human rights contacts in Namangan said that word of Tursunov's alleged instructions to the imams had leaked to the community and had caused offense to Muslims. Former Radio Free Europe journalist and human rights activist Nosir Zokirov told poloff on September 12 that he had listened to an Uzbek-state controlled radio program in which the commentator confirmed that Tursunov had given such instructions to the other imams. However, according to Zokirov, the radio commentator said that Tursunov gave the instructions on his own accord without direction from the Muslim Spiritual Board in Tashkent. Zokirov speculated that authorities were upset that word of Tursunov's meeting had leaked and were seeking to control the community backlash by publicly blaming him for the incident.

¶ 16. (C) On September 19, poloff met in Tashkent with dissident academic and former Soviet diplomat Tashpulat Yuldashev, who said that he had heard of both the controversy over Tursunov and the radio broadcast denying that Tursunov was acting under instructions from Tashkent. Yuldashev, who said that he occasionally meets with members of the Muslim Spiritual Board, told poloff that the Board has long sought to discourage youth attendance at mosques, especially during Ramadak0' believed that its campaign finally has started to demonstrate results, noting that he has seen a clear decline in the last year in the number of young people attending mosques in the Tashkent region (Note: Contacts in Namangan and Ferghana told poloff that youth continue to make

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up a sizable percentage of those attending prayers. End note.) Yuldashev further speculated that authorities are upset at Tursunov for failing to prevent word of the meeting from leaking and may therefore remove him from his position shortly.

REPORTS OF MOSQUE DEMOLITIONS IN ANDIJON

¶ 17. (C) Rasul Tadjibaev, a Human Rights Alliance member and brother of imprisoned human rights activist Mutabar Tadjibaeva, told poloff on September 19 that authorities have started to tear down unregistered mosques in Andijon province. He said that, according to his colleagues in Andijon, the campaign began about three months ago and has targeted smaller unregistered mosques in mahallas (neighborhoods) and rural areas. Tadjibaev was unsure how many mosques have already been destroyed. He said that in a few cases, local authorities have permitted the construction of restaurants serving alcohol where the mosques once stood.

COMMENT

¶ 18. (C) Reports that the Government is trying to discourage youth from attending mosques, especially during Ramadan, are not new. Tursunov's alleged instructions to Namangan imams simply could represent a new intensification of this effort. The Government fears the growth of religiosity, especially among youth, as a potential political force and threat to its own power. We are unsure of Yuldashev's claim that youth attendance at mosques has declined, as we have heard from an imam earlier this summer that attendance in Tashkent continues to climb. As Yuldashev himself said during his meeting with poloff, many people in Uzbekistan are tired of the Government's empty promises on political and economic

reforms and attending prayers may serve as a form of symbolic protest. Attending mosques also may serve a socio-economic purpose for unemployed youth - networking for job leads.

¶9. (C) In regards to the reported demolishing of mosques in Andijon, Authorities have destroyed or closed down unofficial mosques in the past, so this would not be surprising. As for using mosques as pubs or for other unclean purposes, this was a common practice during Soviet days. However, we have not independently confirmed this latest accusation.

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